

**Role Of Marthandavarama For The Decline Of
Traditional Militia In Travancore - A Study**

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From time immemorial onwards the course and destiny of human history was regulated and decided by the might of the martial forces. A sound military force constituted an important factor in the rise of all great kingdoms in the world. There could not be land empire without a sufficient armed force. The neglect of defence would ultimately result in the sudden collapse and disintegration of that respective kingdom. Thus the existence of a state is largely depended upon its military force.¹ A well organized, well disciplined and well trained regular militia formed an integral part of every state. In Travancore, before the origin of the police force and the formation of state military force, the defence of the kingdom was looked after by the Nayar Brigade². They maintained law and order within the kingdom. The Nayars constituted the bulk of the militia. Unlike any other community the Nayar community dedicated itself to the cause of the king and the kingdom from its very beginning.³

Most of them were intensely patriotic and freedom loving. They derived perpetual satisfaction only through their steadfast and sincere service. An ordinary soldier received 6 1/2 rupees only per mensem.⁴ They were satisfied with that meager amount. The foreigners who visited this part

of India were highly impressed with the chivalrous and adventurous spirit of the Nayar soldiers.⁵

Militia acquired the meaning of a Domestic force for the defence of a nation as distinguished from regular army. Militia is the name given to fighting men, normally citizens compelled to be soldiers on call. In Athens, under Pericles, youths were admitted to manhood by way of military training and the formal acceptance as armed citizens. The true militia system as a legal tradition is based upon the obligatory of every man to serve his nation. It is distinguished from the military system of most modern times in that they maintain substantial standing armies to which the citizen forces are only supplements.⁶ It is considered as a defensive force. The Nayar militia in Travancore was a defensive force of the feudal chieftains, the King and the state.

Thus the traditional system of warfare which persisted almost until the beginning of the modern period might have originated in this way. This social group might have evolved into a caste known as Nayars. In course of time, soldiering became the traditional occupation of the Nayars especially after the 11th century AD.⁷ From the beginning of the Christian era down to the 12th century, it was the Nayars who commanded the army. During the Sangam, under the Cheras, the 'Nagas were the commandants of the army. Other communities like the Mazhavar and Ayinas had also enjoyed important position in the Chera army, but the majority of them were TS Tagas' or 'Nayars'. There was also no other fighting class superior to the

Nayars, and no other caste could ever rise to the position of a fighting class as the Nayars.

Until the time of Marthanda Varma, the king depended upon the Nayar militia of the land. Seeking alternative method of defense system, Marthanda Varma organized a permanent force as a supplement to the Nayar militia.⁸ The traditional system of warfare underwent tremendous change throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. The internal stability of the Travancore Kingdom and its subsequent military weakness provided opportunities for the rulers of Madurai and other eastern neighbours to send maruding marava troops. The predominance of European powers like the Dutch and English also offered threats to the authority of the monarch.

Therefore it was necessary to sub-due the feudal barons, who were the chieftains of the traditional militia and they safeguarded the independence and integrity of the Kingdom. It was necessary to take urgent measures when Marthanda Varma came to power in 1729. His ambition was also to recover the territories which were once controlled by the Venad rulers. There was no organized, equipped, trained and disciplined standing army. He inherited the command over the feudal army which adopted traditional methods of warfare. More over the Kings authority was very weak and they had neither financial resources nor man power to create a standing army because of the influence of the feudal barons and their control over the land.⁹ It was under such circumstances that Marthanda Varma decided to set aside the traditional chiefs of warfare by stages.

The soldiers of new militia used traditional weapons since there was no revolutionary change effected in the art of warfare Marthanda Varma presumed that the militia was organized in the traditional manner and that the methods of warfare also were primitive in character. Hence during his reign efficient arrangements were made for the manufacture of fire arms, swords and guns. The great bulk of army was composed of Nayar soldier who employed a unique reputation for great military qualities. After his accession to the throne Marthanda Varma appointed Kumaraswamy Pillai as commander-in-chief with Thanu Pillai as his assistance. They formed the army by enrolment of the sons of the soil in large numbers. The soldiers were supplied with better arms and strict discipline was enforced. A better sense of loyalty and obedience was inculcated among different ranks and files of the army segments.¹⁰

In 1780, the Travancore army consisted of 50,000 men, well trained by European officers. The state had also at its disposal the service of 10,000 Nayars and chegos armed with bows, arrows, spears, swords and battle axis. There were cantonments in different parts of the kingdom. The soldiers marched up and down the country to enforce the collection of taxes and to preserve peace and tranquility. The army was paid partly in money and partly in kind and thus it was feudalized. In the militia there were also musketeers who were infantry soldiers. They took a very sure aim to fire and the first shot generally hit and inflicted great mischief. The Travancore infantry was always effective. There were draft elephants but not much of

cavalry.¹¹ In 1734, Quilon and Kayamkulam were attacked by the Maharaja's forces under the joint command of Kumaraswamy Pillay¹², Thanu Pillai¹³ and Ramayyan.¹⁴ At this time, the Travancore army was strengthened with the addition of cavalry and infantry. Furthermore new fire arms were obtained from the English merchants trading at Anjengo and Edava.

Thus at the time when the Dutch advanced into Kerala between Colachel and Kottar, The Travancore army consisted of infantry, artillery, musketeers, elephants and cavalry, and the cavalry was commanded by Rama lyen Dalavai. In spite of the fact that there were few fire arms purchased from the English, the army was not even partly European but mainly native in character. The native army which was powerful enough to defeat the European army met at Colachel on 10 August 1741. Marthanda Varma did not forget to strengthen the infantry stationed in South Travancore by the addition of new Nayar soldiers.¹⁵ The timely reorganizations brought by Marthanda Varma to his army and the martial quality of Travancore helped him to win battle after battle including the battle of Colachel. The war with the Dutch revealed him the superiority of the trained infantry over the feudal levies when the country grew in size in consequent to conquests.

Marthanda Varma was wise enough to realize the necessity of keeping men in a permanent military service to ensure safety and peace in the conquered provinces He also realised that the time was most suitable for

the adoption of European warfare. In order to ensure victory, Hyder Ali and Nizam of Hyderabad had employed European generals. A squad of 600 men of Travancore army were defeated at Quilon by the Dutch and were forced to retreat in 1742.¹⁶ This incident caused agony to Marthanda Varma and he was fully convinced of the fact that a drained and disciplined standing army on the European model was the need of the hour. The European weapons became inevitable for the safety of the country.

Marthanda Varma decided to create the standing army under the guidance and instruction of Delanoy, one of the prisoners captured in the battle of Colachel.¹⁷ Thus for the first time in the history of Travancore standing army trained on the European model came into existence. Marthanda Varma appointed captain Delanoy as captain in his highness service. In order to modernize the army he recruited the sons of the soil in the country like Nayars, Nadars, Ezhavas and Christians. The conquests of Marthanda Varma were made with the help of armies composed of his own subjects. The Matilakom records also prove that the army of Marthanda - Varma consisted on mainly of his own subjects.¹⁸ The best of the soldiers were *Kunchukuttakkar* who were picked Nayars.

Ettuveetil Pillamars

With a view to obtain better loyalty and services, new class of nobility was created in the place of the old nobility of the eight houses of Nayars. They were not at all the feudal barons of the country like the Ettu Vittil Pillamars. He thought that the Chief Military Commanders should be

the natives of the land and thus Delanoy was not made the first in command.¹⁹ Thus by creating new nobility called Annavis and by making them great men of his kingdom and also by recruiting all other classes of people into the standing army, he took the first step towards the destruction of the traditional feudal army of the Nayar nobility. This first step was the beginning of the decline of Nayar dominance.

In October, 1744, the King of Travancore received 150 arms from the Anjengo Government.²⁰ And in December 1744 Travancore Maharaja received from English 200 small arms.²¹ Agreements were made between the company's authorities at Anjengo and the Maharaja for the ready procuring of gun powder flints, arms and ammunition and accordingly in 1744 the King of Travancore was supplied with 30 barrels of gun powder and 2000 flints.

Year after year in accordance with the need of the time arms and ammunition were supplied to the Maharaja in exchange for pepper. This regular flow of European weapons helped to Europeanise the army under the guidance of Delanoy. Then Delanoy made everything that was required for the defence of the country and brought into the service. The army consisted of 72 battalians of 200 men.

END NOTES

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4. Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai, **op.cit.**, p. 346.
5. **Ibid.**, p. 347.
6. The Nayar Brigade of Travancore, The Government Press, Madras, 1898, p. 25.
7. Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, **op.cit.**, p. 295.
8. Edgar Thurston, **Castes and Tribes of Southern India.**, Vol. V, Madras, 1909, pp. 152-154.
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10. Fuller, C.J., **Nayars Today**, University Press, Cambridge, 1976, p. 251.
11. Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, **op.cit.**, p. 325.
12. Velupillai, T.K., **op.cit.**, Vol. IV, p. 127.
13. Nagam Aiya, V., **Travancore State Manual**, Vol.1, Trivandrum, 1906, pp.232-38.
14. **Ibid.**
15. Velupillai, T.K., **Travancore State Manual**, Vol. I, Trivandrum, 1940, p. 858.
16. Churchill's collection of Voyages and Travels, Vol.11, Letters from Malabar, pp. 235-236.
17. Pappu Tambi and Raman Tambi rose for the throne in 1730. The insurrection proved the immediate necessity for taking measure to strengthen the position of the Maharaja. So Marthanda Varma appointed Kumaraswami Pillai as commander in chief. Thanu Pillai was the Dalava of Travancore during the period between the

death of Arumugam Pillai in 1736 and the appointment of Ramayyan as Dalava in 1737. Ramayyan was the Dalawa of Travancore (1737 - 1757).

18. Velu Pillai, T.K., **op.cit.**, Vol. IV, p. 343.
19. Selections from the Record of Madras Government, Nayar Brigade of Travancore, pp. 24 - 27.
20. Velu Pillai, T.K., **op.cit.**, Vol. IV., p. 25.
21. **Ibi d.**, p. 26.